

## It's All in the Data If You Know Where to Look

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# IT'S ALL IN THE DATA

## IF YOU KNOW WHERE TO LOOK



When deciding where to attend college, high school students and their parents consider a variety of factors: a great campus visit experience, out-of-pocket costs, conversations with faculty members, opinions of friends and family. They also rely on a variety of other data, whether through third-party college rankings like *U.S. News and World Report* or self-reported statistics like the student-to-faculty ratio.

Data matters to colleges and universities, too; it helps them know whether they're accomplishing what their mission and vision statements say they aim to do.

"We measure things that matter to us so we can make sure we are doing a good job in providing an effective, efficient education for students," says Jim Bos ('85), registrar and director of institutional research at Dordt.

There's certainly more to the university search process than analyzing data, but as the Covid-19 pandemic leads fewer people to visit campus and prompts



more of them to get their information online, high school students and their parents will need to rely more on data to determine which college or university to choose.

### COLLEGE RANKINGS AND WHAT TO LOOK FOR

College rankings are one of the easiest ways to find certain data. Sources like *U.S. News and World Report*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Princeton Review* compile data, either by conducting surveys or using college and university-reported data, to make comparisons. They then publish their findings online, making it easy for curious students and parents to unearth the information they're looking for.

Not all rankings are created equal, though. When it comes to analyzing rankings, Bos suggests that high school students and their parents pay attention to what's driving the rankings.

"In the Reformed world, we don't believe anything is neutral, and the same is true of rankings—there are assumptions built into them," says Bos. "In our courses, we talk about how everyone has a worldview—everyone is looking at life through a particular lens. Data and rankings need to be interpreted that way

too, and it's important to think about what is driving the thinking behind how data is presented."

Take, for example, the fact that Dordt University has been ranked number one in student engagement for five years in a row by *The Wall Street Journal* and *Times Higher Education*. The student engagement category measures

"Given what *The Wall Street Journal* has defined as 'engagement,' our students report that, yes, Dordt does provide an engaging educational experience," says Bos.

Faith is not a factor in *The Wall Street Journal's* rankings, but Dordt employees see faith as a key part of what makes Dordt an engaging place for students, as

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"views on things such as interactions with faculty and other students, the effectiveness of teaching and whether students would recommend their school," according to *The Wall Street Journal* article "Top Colleges in the Midwest for Student Engagement."

faith directly influences the educational process and experience.

"This ranking does not define Dordt—no ranking ever will, but it is indicative of what a family will find at Dordt and what they can expect," says Brandon Huisman, vice president for enrollment and marketing. "Dordt is a campus community that challenges, encourages, and inspires students inside and outside of the classroom. We want students to understand that God loves them, that he has created them with certain gifts to be shared with the world, and that faith can and should inform every part of their lives."

Some rankings are seen as more reliable than others—and with good reason. *U.S. News and World Report*, one of the oldest college rankings and viewed as one of the most reputable, adjusts the parameters they measure every year so that it can give a reasonably balanced view of the data they present. This, among other reasons, can cause a shift in rankings from one year to the next. For example, after having placed sixth in the "Best Regional Colleges in the Midwest" category in 2019, Dordt tied for third in 2020 and then tied for fourth in 2021 in the same category.

To understand how the data is interpreted, students must pay attention to themes and data emphasized in the rankings and make sure they align with



JAMIN VER VELDE '99

Faculty find a variety of ways to engage their students. Here, an environmental science class wades into the west branch of the Floyd River to collect samples as part of a lab.



Many high school students are also taking advantage of Dordt's dual credit program, earning college credit in order to graduate in less than four years.

the mission and vision of the university they wish to attend.

"You want to ask the question, 'Does the data fit who the institution is trying to be?'" says Bos.

For example, Dordt placed second for *U.S. News and World Report's* 2021 ranking "Best Undergraduate Teaching: Regional Colleges Midwest," which focuses "on schools where faculty and administrators are committed to teaching undergraduate students in a high-quality manner." That ranking, similar to *The Wall Street Journal's* student engagement category, affirms how dedicated Dordt faculty are to providing students with a quality, engaging educational experience. Another interesting example is Dordt's ranking from *U.S. News and World Report* in "Top Performers on Social Mobility: Regional Colleges Midwest," where Dordt placed sixth in the 2021 rankings. This category assumes that economically disadvantaged students are less likely to finish college, but that "some colleges are more successful than others at advancing social mobility by enrolling and graduating large proportions of disadvantaged students awarded with Pell Grants." The "Top Performers on Social Mobility" ranking aligns well with Dordt's mission for education and affirms that it is meeting this goal.

"For years, we have given students the opportunity to try out a Dordt education, if they want it—that's been part of our mission since B.J. Haan helped found Dordt in 1955," says Bos.

That commitment means helping students who might be economically disadvantaged get the financial aid they need and, in a growing number of cases, complete their degree in less than four years.

## RECENT DORDT RANKINGS

### ***U.S. News and World Report:***

- #4** in Regional Colleges Midwest (tie – 2021)
- #3** in Regional Colleges Midwest (tie – 2020)
- #2** in Best Undergraduate Teaching (tie – 2020 and 2021)
- #2** in Most Innovative Schools (tie – 2020)
- #2** in Social Mobility (2020)

### ***Wall Street Journal / Times Higher Education:***

- #1** in Student Engagement (2017-2021)

Bos believes there are areas where the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings could improve—for example, their reputation survey, which is sent to presidents and others in college administration, makes up 20% of the overall score and can be seen more as a "presidential popularity contest" than a true measure of student success—but, overall, says Bos, *U.S. News and World Report* does its best to present the data in a fair manner.

## ACCEPTANCE AND RETENTION RATES: WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

In addition to rankings, high schoolers and their parents should examine other data in their college search process.

"Again, it's important to ask, 'Does the data fit who the institution is trying to be?'" says Bos.

For example, in fall 2019, Dordt had a 75% acceptance rate; for the fall 2020 semester, Dordt's acceptance rate was approximately 72%. This is much higher than, say, Harvard University, which only accepts approximately 5% of applicants each year. But Dordt's 72% acceptance rate aligns well with the welcoming and service-minded vision that Dordt's first president, B.J. Haan, dreamed of—if you want a deeply Christian education and you're willing to work hard, Dordt might be a good place for you.

"Looking at the big picture, students and their parents might ask, 'What kind of student do they admit, and does that fit what I as a parent or a student want? And then, once that student enrolls, how well do they do—can the university help the student succeed?'" adds Bos.

Dordt has been committed to developing programs that help any student who wants to be here succeed. One such program is the Aspire Program, which provides an opportunity for motivated students who have the potential to be successful at Dordt but who do not meet the regular admissions standards. The Aspire Program helps students adopt strategies and skills for learning by providing them with classes like "Essential Strategies for Academic Success," weekly conferences with an academic coach, tutoring assistance, and more.

These efforts pay off, says Sharon (Lourens, '96) Rosenboom, academic enrichment director. Of the 31 students



in the fall 2019 Aspire cohort, 90% earned GPAs above 2.0 in their first semester, which put them in good standing academically. Approximately 45% earned GPAs above 3.0. Access to programs like the Aspire Program can provide students with a chance to achieve a Christ-centered college education at Dordt.

Bos also recommends paying close attention to the retention rate, which is defined by Federal Student Aid as “the percentage of a school’s first-time, first-year undergraduate students who continue at that school the next year.”

For 2020, Bos says the retention rate is 83.8%.

“Given our lack of selectivity, 83.8% is a good number,” says Bos. Harvard, he points out, has a 97% retention rate. They’d be out of business with an 83.8% retention rate because they set such a high bar for student admission. Dordt’s commitment to giving students the opportunity to see whether Dordt is a good place for them means it will not have 100% retention. “A Dordt education is not going to be for everybody, and that’s okay, but we work hard to retain as many students as we can.”

### HOW DOES RESIDENTIAL LIVING SUPPORT ACADEMICS?

Campus housing plays a big role in retention efforts; more than 90% of students live on campus, from underclassmen residence halls to upperclassmen apartments.

“We try to create a safe space where we’re supporting students’ success in the classroom,” says Robert Taylor ‘99, vice president of student success.

College can be a challenging time for students, socially, spiritually, emotionally, and mentally. Living in the residence halls and apartments provides students with a place to grow, learn how to handle difficulties, and build community. Students who live on campus have easy access to the Student Health and Counseling Center, as well as a wide range of other resources provided by Student Services. And when students live on campus, the Student Services team can easily respond to those who are having a tough time, helping them get back on track so they can be successful in the classroom.

“When you’re struggling, your natural

tendency is to bury your head in the sand. When you live on campus, we can knock on your door—and if we can help you in the first week of receiving an academic alert, you’re more likely to get back on track,” Taylor says.

“If I could tell parents to ask one question of universities, it would be, ‘What percentage of your students who come in as new freshmen actually are finished with their program in four years?’”

— Jim Bos, registrar and director of institutional research

### ARE STUDENTS REALLY LEARNING?

Another thing to explore, says Bos, is whether institutions are “moving the needle” when it comes to students’ learning.

“Dordt aims to advance students’ Reformed perspective as they develop academic skills,” says Bos.

One tool Dordt relies on for monitoring students’ academic success is the ETS proficiency profile. The ETS profile

assesses four core skill areas—reading, writing, mathematics, and critical thinking—to help gauge whether students are improving in these four areas during college. Dordt students take the test as incoming freshmen to get a baseline score. Then, during the second

semester of their junior year, after having taken most of Dordt’s core classes, the students take the test again. Bos and the Institutional Research team compare the data to see how juniors have grown since their freshmen year.

In the latest ETS proficiency profile, which came out in June 2019, Dordt juniors on average had an eight-point gain in growth on the total score, which combines the reading, writing, mathematics, and critical thinking scores. This put Dordt juniors in the 94th

JAMIN VER VELDE '99



Although students have to wear masks while indoors on Dordt’s campus this fall, they are not required to wear masks in their own apartments or dorm rooms.

percentile as compared to other colleges and universities who conduct the ETS proficiency profile.

"The ETS data shows that Dordt students do indeed learn," says Bos. "Our curriculum has helped students to grow their communication, writing, quantitative, critical thinking, and reading abilities. All this while shaping a worldview that helps them develop as effective kingdom citizens."

## GRADUATION RATES TELL A STORY

Bos also urges high school students and their parents to examine a school's graduation rate. According to the U.S. Department of Education, "graduation rates are the calculated percentages of students who graduate or complete their program within a specified time frame." In spring 2020, Dordt had its best graduation rate ever, with 74.5% graduating within six years.

Institutions must report a six-year rate, but Bos encourages those looking at college to push further.

"If I could tell parents to ask one question of universities, it would be, 'What percentage of your students who come in as new freshmen actually are finished with their program in four years?' he says.

There are many institutions where students graduate in 5 or 5.5 years. As of 2020, Dordt's four-year graduation rate is 95.7%.

"At Dordt, we work very hard to get as many students through in four years as we can. We understand that college is expensive and that it's an investment. We want to help our students get out in the world and fulfill their calling," says Bos.

## CAREER OUTCOME RATES

Another data point to pay attention to is the career outcomes rate—the percentage of students who are in graduate school or have found employment within six months of graduation.

"Most students choose to attend college to better their employment prospects," says Amy Westra ('88), associate director of the Career Development Center. "Understanding the cost of college, it is important for students and their parents

## RATES AND RELATED QUESTIONS TO ASK

**Acceptance rate** – what kind of student do they admit?

**Retention rate** – can the school help them succeed?

**Graduation rate** – can the school help them succeed?

**Career outcomes rate** – can the school help them succeed?

**Overall, does this data fit who the institution is trying to be?**

to have some idea of what they can expect for a return on investment."

A key to understanding a school's career outcomes rate is to pay attention to the knowledge rate that's reported—how many students responded to the survey?

"An institution can base their career outcome report on a knowledge rate of 45-65%. This means that some colleges and universities may only know where 45% of their students landed after graduation. It's great that 95% of that 45% were employed or in graduate school, but what about the other 65%?" says Westra.

She encourages high school students and their parents to ask institutions where their knowledge rates fall for recent graduating classes.

Dordt's knowledge rate far exceeds the national averages, with 95.1% of 2019 graduates responding to the career outcomes survey.

"We are tenacious in tracking students down in order to find out where they have landed after graduation," she says. "We want students and parents to know that their investment in a Dordt education is paying off."

Dordt's career outcomes rate is impressive, too; 99% of the class of 2019 reported that they were employed or in graduate school within six months of graduation.

"When I look at the success of Dordt graduates, I think one of the largest contributing factors is the community that wraps around each student to help ensure their future success," adds Westra. "So, yes, students do leave Dordt prepared for the vocation of their choice, but they also have the co-curricular experiences designed to reinforce the academics—everything from a biblical understanding of self and God's kingdom to the ability to solve problems on the job, communicate

effectively with teammates, or lead community growth initiatives wherever they are planted next."

## ARE ALUMNI SATISFIED?

At Dordt, Alicia (Groen, '05) Bowar, associate director of alumni and parent relations, sends a survey out to one-third of alumni each year, to better understand how well Dordt is serving alumni and families. When examining the results from this year's survey, what stood out most to Bowar was the percentage of alumni who said they would recommend Dordt to others and that they felt cared for by a professor.

"It made me so grateful to hear that 95.6% of respondents would recommend Dordt to a prospective student and that 87% felt cared for by a professor during their time here," she says. "Dordt has been ranked number one in student engagement for the past five years by current students, but I think the community that engages and cares for students has been at our core since the beginning. I'm grateful for the staff and faculty over the decades who have carried on our mission and commitment to students."

Data, rankings, statistics—"it's important, but it should never be the only thing you look at," says Bos.

"The data only gets you so far. You don't want to go to an institution that doesn't retain or graduate students; class size is important, as is student-to-faculty ratio. But what really matters is, how does the institution fulfill its mission? How does the data show me that you're living up to your mission? Because, at the end of the day, that's what matters," says Bos. "At Dordt, our data is good, but I think that, as far as our mission goes, we knock it out of the park."

SARAH MOSS ('10)